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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In my introductory courses it is not uncommon for students to assume that Jews and Christians share the Old Testament. These students are surprised when I state that Jews have their own canon that is often called the Tanak and that Christians are the ones with the canon called the Old Testament.¹ While the canons may contain the same books, the practices and meanings of these communities in relation to the books result in two distinct canons."



Dr. John Fadden

A Note on the Jewish Tanak and the Christian Old Testament

In my introductory courses it is not uncommon for students to assume that Jews and Christians share the Old Testament. These students are surprised when I state that Jews have their own canon that is often called the Tanak and that Christians are the ones with the canon called the Old Testament.¹ While the canons may contain the same books, the practices and meanings of these communities in relation to the books result in two distinct canons.

What one calls something matters. Christians have long used the name ‘Old Testament’ to distinguish the first part of the Christian Bible from the ‘New Testament’. The title Old Testament implies is limited, antiquated, and in need of completion, especially when it is viewed in relation to the New Testament. Some Christian theologians have tried to soften the supersessionist implications of Old Testament when they refer to it as ‘First Testament’. Just a name change does not solve the problem of supersessionism as the First Testament is still followed by a ‘Second Testament’ (the New Testament) which completes it in the Christian Bible. The Jewish Bible is called the ‘Tanak’ -- an acronym for its three parts (Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim) – or ‘*Mikra*’ – a rabbinic title for the Bible, which in Hebrew means “that which is

¹ There are more than two Bibles in Christianity and Judaism. For the sake of simplicity, I am going to focus on the Protestant Christian Old Testament and the Rabbinic Jewish Bible.

read.” Tanak implies an authoritative order, an order that place Torah before the other two parts. *Mikra* names the performative function associated with the Jewish Bible: it is to be read aloud in synagogue. In addition, biblical scholars’ use the term ‘Hebrew Bible’ as an attempt at a suitable, theologically-neutral, inclusive term for the collection of texts they study. This term is not adequate either, since the collection of texts contains passages which were written in Aramaic and it ignores the importance of ancient translations of the collections.²

Jonathan Z. Smith influences my understanding of canon.³ As a scholar of religion, Smith redescribes canon as a subgenre of lists. A canon is a closed collection with a relatively clear principle of order. As a closed collection of books, canon is a retrospective category. It is received as an authoritative collection of books. Smith further suggests that while canon has a limiting function in terms of which books are included, they are not merely closed. A hermeneute offers exegetical ingenuity to overcome the limitation and closure of a canon. For scholars of religion, authority and power do not inhere in the books; rather human communities come to receive canons as authoritative through the manipulation of the books through social practices. The Tanak and the Old Testament, while containing the same books, 1) exhibit different orders, 2) have had different hermeneutical principles, and 3) different social practices within the community that indicate the canon’s authority. In this note, I will focus on the received order of the canons that one can find in a Jewish Bible or Protestant Bible.⁴

² Once the decision is made to study Hebrew Bible, the place of ancient Jewish texts found primarily in Greek, such as Ben Sira, are no longer necessary for general study as part of the scholar’s canon, even though it may be a part of one or another group’s canon. In addition, while this is not the place to enter an insider-outsider argument, such a name also leads to confusion for insiders (Jews or Christians) since the outsider (scholar) category ‘Hebrew Bible’ is not native-insider-language for the canon of Jews or Christians.

³ J.Z. Smith. "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* (ed. Green; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 11-28; J.Z. Smith. "Canons, Catalogues and Classics," in *Canonization and Decanonization* (eds. Kooij, et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 295-311.

⁴ I use the received order found in a JPS Tanak and a NRSV Old Testament.

The order of the books differs between the Jewish Tanak and the Christian Old Testament.⁵ Both canons begin with the Torah, sometimes called the Pentateuch.⁶

| <u>Tanak</u> | <u>Old Testament</u> |
|--------------|----------------------|
| Genesis | Genesis |
| Exodus | Exodus |
| Leviticus | Leviticus |
| Numbers | Numbers |
| Deuteronomy | Deuteronomy |

Table 1: Torah / Pentateuch

After the Torah, the Tanak and the Old Testament divide their canons in different manners. The Tanak’s next division is its collection of Prophets (Nevi’im), while for the Old Testament there are Historical books. These two collections have some overlap in what are known as the “Former Prophets” of the Tanak (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) being part of the Historical books of the Old Testament. The other books found in this section of the Old Testament are found in the last section of the Tanak, in the Writings (Ketuvim). Likewise, the Old Testament’s section of Prophets contains many of the Tanak’s prophetic books. The Old Testament’s historical books, from Joshua to Esther, recount a history of Israel from its entry into Canaan through the Persian Period. The Tanak’s Nevi’im contains the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets (“former” and “latter” refer to the books’ placement within the collection, not to historical chronology). Of the Latter Prophets, three prophets have their own books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), while the shorter prophetic works are collected into one scroll and referred to as The Twelve Minor Prophets. In Judaism, Samuel and Kings are considered as one book each, while in Christianity they are divided into two books each.

⁵ I am not concerned with ancient orders and how they were and were not transmitted. Needless to say, prior to mass printing technology and the closure of the canons, a variety of orders are exhibited in ancient and medieval manuscripts. I am concerned with the canons as received.

⁶ Of course, the Hebrew naming practice for books of the Bible also distinguishes the two canons. For simplicity’s sake, I will stick with the English titles.

| <u>Tanak (Nevi'im)</u> | <u>Old Testament (Historical)</u> |
|---|---|
| Joshua | Joshua |
| Judges | Judges |
| [Ruth found in Ketuvim] | Ruth |
| Samuel | 1-2 Samuel |
| Kings | 1-2 Kings |
| [Found in the Ketuvim] | 1-2 Chronicles |
| [Found in the Ketuvim] | Ezra |
| [Found in the Ketuvim] | Nehemiah |
| [Found in the Ketuvim] | Esther |
| Isaiah | [Found in Prophetic Section of Old Testament] |
| Jeremiah | [Found in Prophetic Section of Old Testament] |
| Ezekiel | [Found in Prophetic Section of Old Testament] |
| The Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) | [Found in Prophetic Section of Old Testament] |
| | [Found in Prophetic Section of Old Testament] |

Table 2: Nevi'im vs. Historical Books

The Historical books of the Old Testament are followed by a section of Wisdom / Poetic books. It has overlaps with the Tanak's final section, the Writings (Ketuvim). Yet, the Old Testament Wisdom books as a section are not a parallel to the Writings. Most obvious is the Old Testament Wisdom books are fewer in number. Many of the books in the Ketuvim are found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Ruth, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles belong to the Historical books of the Old Testament. Lamentations follows Jeremiah in the Old Testament's section of Prophetic books. Also, Daniel belongs to the Prophetic books of the Old Testament. For the Tanak, the order is less consistent in this section, although Psalms as the first work is consistent. The Scrolls are five books read in the synagogue on particular holidays. In the Tanak, Ezra and Nehemiah are considered as one book and, likewise, 1-2 Chronicles is counted as one book. The final three works in the Writings (Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1-2 Chronicles) are treated as historical.

| <u>Tanak (Ketuvim)</u> | <u>Old Testament (Wisdom / Poetic)⁷</u> |
|------------------------|--|
| Psalms | Job |
| Proverbs | Psalms |
| Job | Proverbs |
| “The Scrolls” | Ecclesiastes |
| (The Song of Songs) | Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) |
| Ruth | [Found in the Historical Books] |
| Lamentations | [Found in the Prophetic Books] |
| Ecclesiastes | |
| Esther) | [Found in the Historical Books] |
| Daniel | [Found in the Prophetic Books] |
| Ezra | [Found in the Historical Books] |
| Nehemiah | [Found in the Historical Books] |
| 1-2 Chronicles | [Found in the Historical Books] |

Table 3: Ketuvim vs. Wisdom / Poetic Books

The Prophetic books complete the Old Testament Canon. As discussed above, the Nevi'im is the second section of the Tanak, so these two sections differ in their placements within their respective canons. The two canons do not agree on what books are a part of their prophetic sections. Most of the Old Testament prophetic books are found in the Nevi'im of the Tanak. Daniel is not a prophet for Rabbinic Judaism and thus belongs to the Writings rather than the Prophets. Likewise, Lamentation is not part of the prophetic section in the Jewish Tanak. Its location in the Old Testament may have to do with its association with the prophet Jeremiah.

⁷ Note: One distinction between Protestant and Catholic Old Testaments is the Catholic Wisdom books include Wisdom and Ben Sira after Song of Songs.

| <u>Tanak (Nevi'im)</u> | <u>Old Testament (Prophetic Books)</u> |
|---------------------------|---|
| Isaiah | Isaiah |
| Jeremiah | Jeremiah |
| [Found in the Ketuvim] | Lamentations |
| Ezekiel | Ezekiel |
| [Found in the Ketuvim] | Daniel |
| The Twelve Minor Prophets | [The Twelve Minor Prophets as individual books] |
| (Hosea | Hosea |
| Joel | Joel |
| Amos | Amos |
| Obadiah | Obadiah |
| Jonah | Jonah |
| Micah | Micah |
| Nahum | Nahum |
| Habakkuk | Habakkuk |
| Zephaniah | Zephaniah |
| Haggai | Haggai |
| Zechariah | Zechariah |
| Malachi) | Malachi |

Table 4: Nevi'im vs. Prophetic Books

The Tanak and the Old Testament may contain the same books, but the order of the books differs between the canons. What is more, the *significance* of the books, their order and their sections – what falls within the realm of the received (and on-going) interpretation and social practices of the canon's community of readers – creates the distinction between the Old Testament and the Tanak. For example, one could generalize without too much argument that Christianity views the Old Testament as part of a larger salvation history between God and the World. At the end of the Old Testament, the prophets look forward to the completion of this history. For Christianity, this is fulfilled in the New Testament through Christ. On the other hand, as the chosen people of YHWH, Israel received a covenant. For Rabbinic Judaism, the covenant is given in the Torah. The covenant remains the focus for the Jewish Tanak and privileges the Torah over its other sections. The entire Torah is read over the year in the

synagogue.⁸ Only parts of the rest of the Tanak are read throughout the year.⁹ The Torah is studied to understand the covenant.

Other scholars have explored the differences between Tanak and Old Testament, so nothing I have written here is novel. Nor is this note exhaustive. The distinction between the two canons in terms of the translations and text families of specific books of the canons, or specific hermeneutical practices of the reading communities, or ritual and other social practices of the reading communities could be explored. The theological justifications that various reading communities have generated for why these lists of books are authoritative could be examined. Even the treatment of the Tanak and the Old Testament as material icons might provide further understanding of the differences. What I hope to have done here is to show by following one thread, the received order and divisions of the two canons, that the Old Testament and the Tanak are not merely the same thing with different names.

Works Cited

- Smith, Jonathan Z. "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," Pages 11-28 in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*. Edited by William Scott Green. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978.
- . "Canons, Catalogues and Classics," Pages 295-311 in *Canonization and Decanonization*. Edited by Arie van der Kooij, Karel van der Toorn, and Joannes Augustinus Maria Snoek. Leiden: Brill, 1998.

⁸ By contrast, only portions of the Pentateuch and the rest of the Old Testament might be read as part of the three year lectionary cycle in Christianity's service. And then, the Old Testament reading tends to be subordinate to the Gospel reading.

⁹ The Haphtarah portions come from either the Nevi'im or the Ketuvim. The Scrolls get read during certain holy days – for example, Esther at Purim.